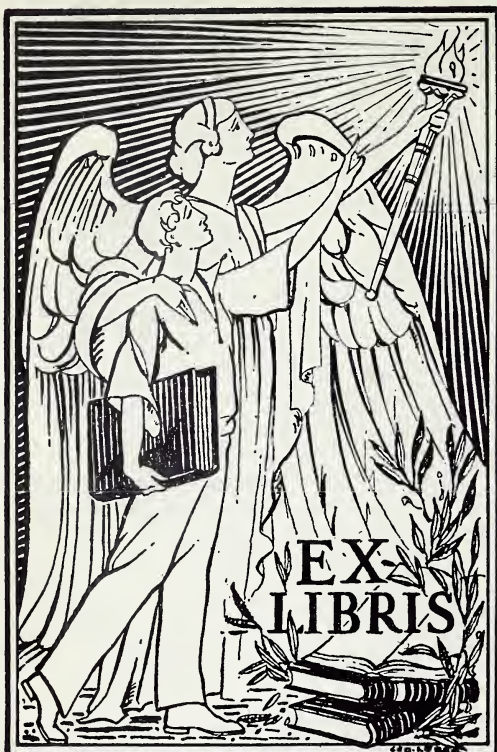


SOME COMMON FALLACIES ABOUT
BLINDNESS

Laurence Hawkes

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SOME COMMON FALLACIES ABOUT BLINDNESS

BY CLARENCE HAWKES

Mr. Hawkes was totally blinded by an accident in 1883. Since then he has written an astonishingly large number of books, articles, stories, and poems, and has been a popular lecturer on natural history.—THE EDITORS.

THERE is probably no abnormal condition of life so little understood and appreciated and about which so much that is erroneous has been written as that of blindness.

The very conditions under which the blind live are so extreme and startling that there has gradually been built up about them a world of fable and fancy as extravagant, if not as thrilling, as the world of fairy stories.

It is to correct some of these erroneous ideas, as well as to point out other facts which are little less remarkable, though truthful, that this article is written.

I have had hundreds of people ask me if I could tell color by the sense of touch. How any sensible person could get the idea that it is possible to tell color from the sense of touch is amazing. It is probably partly due to the fact that the public wants to believe all sorts of wild things about the blind, and also because some blind folks, partly in fun and because they like to astonish their friends, have practiced a sort of magic at their expense. I knew a blind horse dealer who could really tell the color of a horse by the sense of feeling, but the color itself had nothing to do with the feat. It was all performed

through the fact that different colored horses had different textured coats. With some colors the hair was fine, while others were coarse; some coats were smooth and others rough.

Most blind people know the colors of the common flowers, and when a friend places a bouquet in your hand you are always able to recognize the flower by either the perfume or the touch, so one can usually make a very good guess as to the color, although in these days of new shades and widely variegated flora even that little artifice is rather dangerous.

It is also a very common question to have seeing people ask the blind if they can tell the denomination of different bills by the sense of touch, and many folks have told me that they knew blind people who could.

There is only one general rule concerning bills that gives any clue at all as to their denomination, and this has so many exceptions as to be entirely worthless.

Bills larger than one dollar are usually printed upon heavier paper than dollar bills—or at least that has been my impression, but the Treasury Department might tell me that even that conclusion is erroneous.

Most blind people carry a pocketbook with several compartments and keep their bills of

different denominations in different compartments, so they know where they are. In that way they can readily make change and give the impression that they can tell bills by the sense of touch.

There are things that they can do by the sense of touch which are even more remarkable, such as threading a needle by placing the end of the thread on the tongue and shoving the head of the needle along until the thread is thrust through the eye, or replacing delicate springs in a typewriter and keeping the machine in order. I recently successfully adjusted the reproducer on a gráphonola which had become discordant.

This is a very delicate piece of mechanism, and its adjustment is usually attempted only by an expert.

It would seem almost as wonderful for one without the sense of sight to trace the margin on a printed page of a book or newspaper to feel where the type leaves off and the unprinted page begins. Yet I can do that, while I have known blind people who would read raised print through four thicknesses of a silk handkerchief, or play a piano with a spread placed over the keyboard.

To tell the weight of paper in ream lots within five or ten pounds merely from feeling one sheet would seem to call for a very expert sense of touch, yet that is possible, as well as to tell much about the texture and quality of the paper and how it was prepared for book use.

It is probably due as much to the extravagant things that have been written about them as to the rather harmless practices of the blind people themselves that so many erroneous statements have got abroad.

"The Rosary," by Mrs. Florence Barclay, with all its admirable qualities, and notwithstanding all that it has doubtless accomplished for the blind, abounds in amazing portrayals of the condition of blindness.

Readers of "The Rosary" will remember that a crafty Scotch doctor devises the plan of putting in charge of a blind artist, as his nurse, a former sweetheart from whom he has become estranged. While the artist is suspicious of the voice, which reminds him strongly of his friend, although the nurse is using another name, yet he finally succumbs to the subterfuge and is deceived for several weeks until she at last reveals her identity. The entire plot of the story hinges on this deceit.

The fact is that such a deceit would be impossible.

There is as much personality and character in the human voice as there is in the face. It is just as reasonable to say that you would not know your friend by looking on his countenance as that a blind person would not know his friend by the voice, especially when the friend was a sweetheart.

If the voices of a thousand people were tested and analyzed, they would be found to be as individual as the faces of their owners.

I have never in my life met two people whom I could not tell apart by their voices after I came to know them fairly well.

If the voice of nurse Rosemary had not given her away to her blind artist lover, then there is a mental and spiritual aura surrounding every one which would. This sense is very strong between the sexes, and had the young man loved the woman as much as we must believe from the story, even her presence, had she uttered not a word, would have been as apparent to him as the fact that he lived or breathed.

On one occasion the crafty doctor sits in the woods upon a log, with the blind artist on one end of the log and his sweetheart on the other, while he tries to persuade the artist to receive the young lady again into his life.

The blind man stands within a few feet of his affinity, yet does not know she is there.

Now the blind are possessed of a sense perception of solid bodies within a radius of ten or twelve feet which would have told him of this presence had not his aching heart stood him in that stead.

But perhaps the most ludicrous of all Mrs. Barclay's imaginings is that whereby the blind artist sits in his library in an easy chair in the middle of the room, with a blue string leading to the piano, a green one to the typewriter, and a yellow string to the bookcase.

To one who without sight is in the habit of going straight to whatever he wants in the house and putting his hand on it without any fuss, of going into the street unattended, hailing a street car, and doing shopping in many stores of the city alone; to one who takes long lecture trips traveling unattended, this sitting in the library with a colored string leading to each piece of furniture is the funniest thing in literature.

Yet, with all its faults, "The Rosary," with its strong appeal to the seeing for their sympathy and co-operation with the blind in their efforts to master the conditions of their lives, has doubtless done much good.

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